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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women: implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern

Statement submitted by Friends World Committee for Consultation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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Girl soldiers

The Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) (Quakers), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, would like to draw to the attention of the Commission on the Status of Women the following points in relation to the Commission's focus on women in armed conflict and the girl child:

The Quakers United Nations Office, Geneva, the office representing FWCC at the United Nations in Geneva, led the research on child soldiers (defined as those under 18 years of age) for the United Nations report on the impact of armed conflict on children ("Machel report") which was presented to the General Assembly in 1996 (A/51/306). The findings of the Child Soldiers Research Project have been published by Radda Barnen (Stockholm, 1996) in *Children, the Invisible Soldiers*, by Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin.

The finding of particular relevance to the Commission on the Status of Women is that, in many situations, girls as well as boys become involved as active participants in today's

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wars. According to our information, up to a third of the child combatants are girls. This is in itself cause for concern, given the high incidence of death, injury, disease and other problems associated with being a child combatant.

A particular problem faced by many girl soldiers is that, in addition to participating in combat, they are expected or required to provide sexual services. In some cases, girls are in fact primarily recruited or abducted as "wives" or concubines. Such conduct, apart from being in itself a violation of the girls' rights, leads to a high incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, the dangers of pregnancy and/or abortion and associated complications. These consequences, then, may create additional problems for the girls concerned as to their reintegration into civilian society.

The Child Soldiers Research Project highlighted the fact that the overwhelming majority of child soldiers in all current armed conflicts are drawn from the poorest, least educated and most marginalized sectors of society, with those particularly at risk being children separated from their families (for any reason) or with disrupted family backgrounds. Particular attention therefore needs to be given in the short term to keeping families together or reuniting them and to the vulnerability of refugee and displaced children and adolescents (even those with their families). In the longer term, the conclusions of the Project reinforce the need to ensure effective access to education and a reasonable standard of living for all. A particular problem which cannot be overemphasised is that the single major motive for children and adolescents to volunteer for armed opposition groups is their personal experience of ill treatment (torture, killing of family members, destruction of homes) by governmental armed forces and consequent feelings of vulnerability.

FWCC, therefore, urges the Commission on the Status of Women to:

1. Support international efforts to raise the international standards relating to military recruitment and participation in hostilities from 15 to 18 years by means of an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child;

2. Call on all Governments and other authorities to demobilize any under-18-year-olds they currently have in their armed forces or armed groups and to refrain from recruiting under-18-year-olds in future;

3. Call on all States of the Organization of African Unity which are not yet parties to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child to become parties to it, so that the Charter can enter into force;

4. Call on all Governments, humanitarian organizations and the United Nations to take preventive steps to reduce the likelihood of girls being recruited into armed forces or armed groups or abducted for sexual purposes.